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ABSTRACT

Writer-teachers in the classroom offer two characteristics central to teaching students to write. The first is the writer's concern and respect for the students' own language and experience, and the second is the writer's broadly conceived sense of audience in the classroom. Writers try to maintain the connection between their students' own language and experience and the writing they will do in the classroom. They use several methods to help students see this connection, such as letting students talk before writing or allowing class collaboration on a poem. The writers also play a variety of audience roles in order to meet students' needs at particular points in their development and at different stages in the writing process, often sharing their work, thoughts, and feelings with students. Students are encouraged to reciprocate. Students also benefit from peer interaction. Writers provide students with opportunities to "publish," in the form of ditto sheets and literary journals, providing yet another audience and the encouragement that publication brings to writers. This audience sequence suggests a further parallel with the sequence of language activities: one way for a teacher to establish himself or herself as an audience deserving of students' trust is to recognize and accept the value of their language and writing interests. Students must begin writing in their own language about things that matter to them, and it is the job of writing teachers to make forms and conventions serve the students' purpose, not the other way around. (HTH)

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THE WORLD AND THE WRITING CLASSROOM: THE TEACHING OF THE WRITERS-IN-THE-SCHOOLS

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College
Composition and Communication (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983)

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The World and the Writing Classroom: The Teaching of the Writers-in-the-Schools

Ironically, one of our biggest problems, as writing teachers, is the fact that students must join our classes to work on their writing. Outside the classroom, students have active language lives--inside, that is not always the case. In a study at the University of Iowa, Gene Krupa and I found that out of a sample of seventy sophomores who had completed the composition requirement, 50% did writing on their own--from business writing, to journals, to poetry. And junior and senior high school teachers will tell you that students are active note writers. Yet those same students may balk, freeze up, or do poorly in freshman composition.

One reason is that many composition classrooms are so removed from the worlds that students naturally use language in, that writing such things as themes, reports, or research papers must make them feel as alienated as E.T. found himself, drinking beer and watching John Wayne in The Quiet Man.

This problem will never be totally eliminated unless we follow Robert Frost's example and abolish classrooms altogether in favor of the informal gathering, the "salon of good minds." Yet one group of teachers, writers who teach in the schools, have managed to carry some of Frost's spirit to their students without threatening our institutions in the least.

Over the past three years I have had the chance to work with several members of the Iowa Writers-in-the-Schools program and study the published commentaries of writer-teachers in other states, including members of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Although these writers work mainly with elementary and secondary students, and with poetic rather than transactional forms, I feel that they have a great deal to show us about how we can make our classrooms more hospitable places for students to work in. In the bargain, writers may also have a great deal more to show us about our profession. In my

research I found many areas of agreement between the actual teaching practices of writers and some of the theory and research which informs composition studies today, especially the work of James Britton. This is not to say that writers are theorists, or that they have been reading College Composition and Communication. The common ground shared by writers and scholars is a coincidental one, but one nevertheless, that, if explored, might add a dimension to the way we look at ourselves.

Today I would like to focus on two characteristics that I found central to writers' teaching. The first is writers' concern and respect for their students' own language and experience. The second is writers' broadly conceived sense of audience in the classroom. For each of these matters, I would like to give you an idea of the teaching methods writers use and the views they hold, as well as some ways these methods and views might help us, through the intercession of Britton and others, to enrich our views of teaching composition.

Before I do that, though, I want to make it clear that my research is not statistical. Rather it is based on a series of cases and examples drawn from a wide variety of sources, including published materials, classroom observations, and interviews. In order to present some of it here, I will have to rely heavily on a few illustrations to represent many. I do not presume to speak for all writers. My intent is to try to present you with conclusions from my research and illustrate them with examples selected from several similar ones.

The first thing I want to deal with is language and experience. Writers try to maintain the connection between their students' own language and experience, and the writing they do in the classroom. Phillip Lopate, in tracing the history of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative makes the point that this commitment is part of a tradition in American poetry he connects with Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gary Snyder and many others. Lopate interprets the

esthetic point of view represented by these writers as "a turn toward plainer diction, understatement, anecdote,--a recovery of what William Carlos Williams called 'true American speech.'"¹ In making this connection, Lopate is not trying to suggest that writers who teach subscribe artistically to this esthetic. His point is that among writers, an emphasis on plain diction acts as a "possible bridge" between poetic language and "street language and the students' everyday vernacular."

In practice, writers start with their students' language and try to get them to see the connection between their speech and the poetic. Barbara Esbensen, in her book A Celebration of Bees makes this point:

When talking about poetry with children, I emphasize again and again that the poet wants to use our ordinary everyday language in new ways; to make that language open new doors and windows for us and to let us see old familiar things as though we'd never seen them before.²

Here is how David Long, a Montana writer-in-the-schools, puts this same idea. Like other writers, he wants students to develop respect for their individual voices, and to let those voices come through in their writing:

Poetry is, first and last, the spoken word. . . . The job is to hear exactly how we sound, and then to see what new territories of expression the voice can lead us into. . . . By "voice" I have in mind several things, ranging from sleepy grunts we give each other in the hallways every morning, to our most carefully considered speech, to our most anguished crying, to our most passionate yelling and singing. . . . In the classroom I don't necessarily look for the well-made poem. I look for the raw edge in somebody's language, that open nerve, words that sound like they've never quite been put together that way before.³

Writers use several methods to help students see this connection. One is simply to let students talk before writing. Another is the class collaboration in which individual students contribute lines to a class poem by speaking them and having the writer-teacher write them down. Another is to have students transcribe their own or someone else's speech and then revise it into poetic form. Another approach, used by Bill Zavatsky of Teachers & Writers, is to have students take passages from Studs Terkel's Working and transform them from prose to poetry just as Terkel transformed speech to writing. Whatever method a writer uses, these or others, the goal is the same: to make students aware of the connection between their spoken language and poetic language, and to emphasize that poetic forms grow out of, and are not apart from, the shapes and rhythms of a voice speaking. Here is an excerpt from an interview I had with Robert Dana, one of the first Iowa Writers-in-the-Schools, who connects the esthetic of plain diction with a broader understanding of an American oral tradition:

Then there's one other group of students, some of them are not very good with English grammar, probably listen to more rock music than they read literature, but who come out of an oral tradition which is very lively. In fact, it's much more lively than they know. Probably if you asked them to write sonnets, they would do very badly. But if you try to get them to tell you what it's like to go around a curve on a motorcycle at a hundred and ten miles an hour, they will find a brilliant phrase for that. . . .something kinetic. I suspect that there's more invention of language in a Mississippi River town tavern than there is in a lot of classrooms because with those people, story-telling is an art. You know, some guy in a tavern says, "my mother had the eyes of a pig." That is not the usual sense of one's mother.

There's a kind of magic about that. And it calls up a whole world of possibilities. . . . I think that unless kids have this beaten out of them in classrooms, they are aware that it's there to be tapped, and they can recognize it in the work of other poets.⁴

Of course, a point of view like this toward language demands a similiar view toward students writing about their own experience. Phil Hey, an Iowa writer, who feels the pull of experience strongly in his own work, put it to his students in LeMars, Iowa, this way once after reading a couple of his poems:

I suppose you're wondering what these two poems are supposed to mean. Well, I don't know what they mean. But they happened to me. Things that happen to you are real--not sold to you. They might be all there is to life. . . . That's what poems are about. I write so that this wonderful thing that's happening to me won't be lost.

Encouraging students to work from their own experience does not require the unstructured approach that many teachers fear. Writers, who sometimes do like to be unstructured, can be just as successful with structured assignments that involve formal constraints. Here is an example from Barbara Esbensen, an example which also illustrates one way of encouraging students to begin with spoken language. This is a piece written by a thirteen year old student after looking at some reproductions of old funny papers:

Me and my brother finally get the funnies.

I grab Flash to see if he kills the monster
and saves the princess. But he's captured
by the mad Dr. Zin and is held by a secret

force that Dr. Zin invented. Shucks! got
to wait till tomorrow to find out, doggonit.⁵

This monologue, a fictional account of reading the funny papers at home, retains many characteristics of spoken language: informal usage, slang, and casual structure. Here, for comparison, is a haiku written by the same student, based on the same subject matter:

Way Back When

Wonder what happened

to Flash Gordon and Tarzan

and Sunny Sundays.

This revision is no longer in the form of talk, although it still seems true to the writer's language and experience--real and imagined. The writer has transformed it by adopting the conventions of a poetic form.

Perhaps one piece of wisdom composition teachers might take from the teaching of the writers right here is that formal constraints do not preclude beginning with students' own language and experience. This is true, I believe, for both poetic and transactional forms. Here is what Robert Dana has to say on the subject in the interview I had with him:

It is far more important to give a student exercises that free him to deal with his personal experience, social experience, daily life, because this is the stuff out of which poems are made. . . . One of the values of the form is that it is capable of containing and formulating the experience. It is the experience that validates the form.

At this point one must think of James Britton. Many of the teaching approaches I have mentioned so far represent applications of his ideas about

language and writing. In Britton's idea of language functions, the starting point for all discourse is spoken language, which he terms expressive. The subject matter for writing is experience. And it is the natural melding of the two, expressive language and experience, he tells us, that give humans insight and control over their lives.

Together, Britton and the writers agree that experience centered expressive language is the starting point, and that the more specialized forms grow out from there. The example of the comic section Haiku suggests only one way writers make this happen. The first piece, while a performance of sorts, is close to the student's speech and primarily expressive. The haiku, though, has moved along a continuum, as it were, from expressive toward poetic. As the writing shifts from informal to more formal the range of experience, for writer as well as reader, shifts accordingly.

This shift from the spoken form works similarly in the opposite direction on the other side of the continuum just as well, moving from expressive to transactional.⁷

TRANSACTIONAL-----EXPRESSIVE-----POETIC

The research paper, for example, instead of being conceived of as an exercise in working with unfamiliar material in an alien tongue, can just as easily become a reconstruction and elaboration of experience, building formally outward from what the student knows and cares about and what he or she has to say about it.

Two colleagues who offer us approaches to the revision of expressive into transactional forms are Peter Elbow and Gene Krupa. Elbow's free writings--or forced writings, as my students call them--require that students put their own experience, understanding, and feelings into their own language. Once this initial drafting is complete, and the student has gained a foothold, then the process of forming can take place--whether it leads towards persuasion, research,

or some other end.⁸

Krupa develops a similar pattern in his book for student writers, Situational Writing.⁹ Situational Writing is made up of interwoven sequences of writing assignments that begin with expressive, experience-centered writing, and progress, systematically, through explanation and persuasion. Unlike Elbow's "lay your ears back and let fly" approach, Krupa's book is very precisely structured, and, according to some, very Aristotelean.

Just as writers emphasize the connection between the students' language and experience, and the business of the classroom, so do they also conceive of audience in terms that encourage students to maintain contact with their worlds and the people in them.

First of all, writers play a variety of audience roles in order to meet students' needs at particular points in their development and at different stages in the writing process. Writers do not always "play teacher" in the traditional sense. Instead, writers tend to prefer more informal working relationships with their students. Writers often share their own work with students as well as their thoughts and feelings, and they encourage their students to reciprocate. In this they often work consciously against the sort of image that teachers at all levels may seek to achieve and maintain. Here are the words of Dan Cheifetz of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative:

I like to think that Teachers & Writers, tacitly or not, encourages each one of us to teach out of our most authentic selves, and out of the authentic experiences of our lives, as well as using our special talents in the arts. To me, this is the most valuable kind of teaching for children. Kids are often cut off from the feeling lives of adults, since we're so self-protective, so embarrassed by our humanness in front of others, especially children. Kids also rarely get the benefit of

what adults have actually learned in their lives--learned not from books but from our own experiments, mistakes, triumphs. If kids sense a teacher is willing to expose his fallibility and vulnerability to them, and to share some of the hard won insights of his own life, they will respond to that teacher. The teacher becomes a reachable, human model for them, something they need more than a distant authority figure.¹⁰

The work of Phil Hey is outstanding in this regard and is representative of many writers. Phil's first object is to gain his students' interest and trust. He does this by reading to them from his own work and the work of other poets. In the process he talks to them directly about himself, his life, and his work. He then gives them a chance to reciprocate by sharing their work with him. He rewards their trust by showing a serious interest in their work and by giving them an opportunity for success. The manner in which he worked with one junior high student's poem is particularly illuminating. Here is the poem:

Water skiing is an excitement of
gliding untroubled through the splitting
water. Skiing has the
thrill of taking a spill
at your will. Skiing makes
your face damp and your muscles
cramp. But it's quite a big
fright when you take a big wipe. . . .

Phil read this to the class, giving it a better reading than anyone would have thought possible. Then he played the role of first audience by praising the opening lines with unrestrained enthusiasm. "Skiing is an excitement of

gliding untroubled through the splitting water." He said absolutely nothing about the rest of the poem. Later on, though, in working with other poems, he praised the way rhyming was "not forced" and he talked with the students about how he and other writers try to use rhyme. In the course of the discussion he was careful to acknowledge his students' views. What he tried to do was enter into a dialogue with them, one writer speaking to others about a problem of craft, while he let his initial role of encourager modulate into the role of colleague. The talk in the classroom was not unlike talk among peers--a writer's workshop in other words.

Phil's work, in addition to illustrating this evolving pattern in the writer's audience role, points to another characteristic of the way writers teach. In the writer's classroom, though the writer may be the first, he or she is never the last audience. If there is one thing that writers-in-the-schools agree on 100%, it is that students benefit from sharing their work with their classmates. This sharing may take one of many different forms that are familiar to composition teachers. One favorite which I might mention in passing is reading aloud, an activity which emphasizes the oral connections of written language.

Indeed, the use of peer audiences may be at the center of the writer's teaching. Even if a teacher could, why would he or she want to keep students from reading each others' writing. Such sharing between students--formally and informally--creates a unity, a sense of community that I found highly valued by writers. Students who read each other's work pull together. Even if they don't particularly like each other, they do get to know each other in a way classmates rarely get the chance to. And they learn from each other. Here is a statement from Jonathan Baumbaugh which, while written several years ago about teaching college students, still seems to sum up the view I found many writers to hold:

Gradually, even at a subway school like Brooklyn College, the writing class becomes something of a community. Not quite a community--they hardly know each other outside of class--but approximately one. . . . Students are programmed to write for teachers, which is corrupting, I think, no matter how sensitive or intelligent the teacher. My students write for each other and, finally, I hope, for themselves. The good stories read in class--and I tend to read only the best ones--excite other good work, make students aware of possibilities of subject and treatment. One young writer's story touches a forgotten nerve of experience in another. At the same time, student discussions get increasingly rigorous and wise. The more vital the class becomes the less I insist on my own ideas. In fact, when the class is working well, I (metaphorically) disappear, become the least active member of the community.¹¹

Nor do writers' ideas about audience stop there. Wherever writers go they leave behind them a trail of posters, bulletin boards, dittoed sheets, and literary journals. Writers give their students opportunities to publish, and there is no real need, I would think, to elaborate on the positive effects publishing has on writers.

The more I worked with writers, the more obvious it became to me that these approaches, taken together, constitute a natural audience sequence moving from a single supportive individual through publication. One way to understand that sequence is to look at another one very similar to it in Britton's breakdown of audience categories. Beyond the self as audience, Britton sees three main audience categories, "teacher as audience," "wide audience," and "writer to his public." The teacher category includes "child to trusted adult," and "pupil to teacher in a particular relationship." The wider audience category includes

the peer audience.¹² Clearly, these categories, along with publication, represent situations used by writer-teachers. Both the writers and Britton see the need, first of all, for students to be exposed to a supportive, familiar audience, and then to move from that foundation to wider audiences and publication.

One other point here. This audience sequence suggests a further parallel with the sequence of language activities I described earlier. One way for a teacher to establish himself or herself as an audience deserving of students' trust is to recognize and accept the value of their language and the things they want to write about. One way to get students to improve on their writing and, in the process, discover more about themselves and their worlds is to talk to them, writer to writer, about the possibilities open to them in the forms of language and the process of revision. In other words, a shift in the writer-teacher's approach to audience is naturally accompanied by a shift in the approach to language. For the student writing about the comics the shift involved encouraging him to move from an oral form to a haiku suitable for some form of publication. For Phil Hey's students it involved a move from writing for a trusted colleague to a more serious concern for the forms of poetic language.

In Britton's terms, which are more familiar to us, the shift in teaching emphasis takes place on a continuum from expressive language, written down speech, to the forms of transactional language: persuasion, analysis, and so on. Students must begin, Britton says, writing in their own language about things that matter to them, and it is the teacher's job to help them make forms and conventions serve their purposes, and not the other way around.

Also, in Britton's terms, this shift must be accompanied by a coordinate shift in audience. The student's first efforts must be supported, and the teacher must earn the student's trust and hope for success. Once that is

accomplished, teacher and student, early in the process, must enter into a dialogue, a more particular working relationship. Teacher and student become colleagues in the writing process along with the student's peers, to bring the work to completion.

Footnotes

¹Phillip Lopate, ed., Journal of a Living Experiment, (New York: Teachers & Writers, 1979), p. 104.

²Barbara Juster Esbensen, A Celebration of Bees: Helping Children Write Poetry, (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1975), p. 16.

³David Long, I Am an Unknown Greatness: Poems and Notes From Montana's 1974-75 Poetry-in-the-Schools Program, (ERIC: Montana State Arts Council, 1975), p. 43.

⁴Interview with Robert Dana, Mount Vernon, Iowa, May, 1980.

⁵Esbensen, A Celebration of Bees, p. 73.

⁶Ibid., p. 74.

⁷James Britton, et. al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), London: MacMillan Education, 1975), p. 81.

⁸Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁹Gene Krupa, Situational Writing, (Belmont California: Wadsworth, 1982).

¹⁰Dan Chelfetz, "A Love Letter to My Church," Journal of a Living Experiment, p. 307.

¹¹Jonathan Baumbaugh, ed., "Introduction," Writers as Teachers, Teachers as Writers, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), p. 12.

¹²Britton, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), p. 66.